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MANAGEMENT IMPROVISATION¹

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Management improvisation

Management improvisation can be defined as the conception of action as it unfolds in an organizational context, drawing on the available material, cognitive, affective and social resources. It is an individual practice which takes place in light of concrete circumstances. People improvise to solve practical problems which emerge as a result of specific and unplanned circumstances. In this sense, improvisation can be neither managed nor controlled. To improvise or not to improvise is an individual prerogative, resulting from the interaction between the person and his/her circumstances. That is why organizations are not able to manage or to control improvisation. All they can do is to nurture it or to facilitate it.

Improvisation was a neglected concept until the 1990s, when it started to attract the regular attention of a group of scholars. The reasons for the initial neglect and the recent surge of interest can be attributed to the dominating management paradigms. Under the classical mechanistic approach, organizations were viewed as objects of planning and stable design. They were expected to work in a systematic and predictable manner. In this representation of the organizational world, there was no space for improvisation. Improvising in a machine-like organization is not only unnecessary but also dangerous: improvising individuals could damage the smooth functioning of the organization. In such a context, improvisation can be taken as a demonstration of a planning failure. The description of business environments as hypercompetitive, high speed and fast changing, however, stimulated scholarly attention for processes that could lead to survival and advantage in markets that required more than mechanical routines and a focus on efficiency.

The context. It was in this context of fast change and unpredictability that the interest in improvisation flourished. Several seminal texts prepared the ground for the study of the theme, but widespread attention resulted mainly from the almost simultaneous edition of a 1998 special issue of *Organization Science* on organizational improvisation, of Hatch's (1999) paper on the jazz metaphor, Crossan et al.'s (1996) exploration of how planning meets improvisation, Brown and Eisenhardt's (1998) discussion of improvisation in semi-structured organizations and last but not the least, Weick's work on the role of improvisation in the process of organizing (e.g., Weick, 1993, 1998; Weick & Sutcliffe, 2001). Karl E. Weick can be regarded as the author who most consistently fertilized the soil for the 1990s momentum. He discussed the aesthetics of imperfection in orchestras and organizations, pointed out the need to find a space for improvisation in mindful organizing, used jazz as a mindset for organizing and explored the role of minimal structuring as a source of both freedom and coordination/control. These efforts subsequently led to works of synthesis such as those of Cunha, Cunha and Kamoche (1999), who reviewed the literature on improvisation, and Kamoche, Cunha and Cunha (2001), who compiled some of the central articles on the topic.

From a marginal and minor field, improvisation evolved to become a regular presence in the organizational vocabulary. Theories of practice, such as those developed by Giddens (1986), Bourdieu (1990) and Certeau (1988) have helped to reinforce the interest and legitimacy of improvisation not only as a topic of research but also as a framework for explaining social experience. Mentions of improvisation have appeared in discussions of a variety of topics such as planning, dynamic capabilities, strategizing, learning, and so forth. The evolution of research on the topic reflects this renewed and consequential interest. Theoretical explorations of the concept and its relevance, often at

a metaphorical level and relating it with theater and jazz music, came to be complemented with empirical work in such processes as new product development, cross-cultural virtual teams, medical teams and crisis management, for example. This combination between the theoretical understanding of improvisation and its relationship with the arts and the development of empirical work possibly reflects the three major approaches to improvisation: (1) as an intriguing metaphor for organizing; (2) as a possibility for managing the unexpected and the exceptional, and (3) as a normal, everyday organizational practice. The first approach underpins the research exploring the jazz and theatrical metaphors. The second is found in papers dealing with improvisation as a complement or a substitute of planning, namely under crisis situations. The third appears in the research dealing with contexts where traditional planning is useless or undesirable (e.g., high speed) or where, due to historical and sociocultural reasons, people reveal an attraction for improvisational practice – something which seems to happen, for example, in the southern Latin European nations (Aram & Walochik, 1996; Cunha, 2005).

Major dimensions. From the definition, one can easily devise the major dimensions of organizational improvisation. Improvisation has to do, mainly, with: (1) *impromptu* action in an organizational context, and (2) bricolage, or the ability to draw on the available material, cognitive, affective and social resources, in order to solve the problem at hand.

Regarding the first dimension, *impromptu* action, people improvise because they have no routine to tackle a certain issue and because action is required, not optional. In some circumstances, even when faced with a sudden problem, people may decide not to react.

This absence of action may suit the situation but does not correspond to improvisation. There is no improvisation without action. If someone decides not to act in the face of a given problem, he/she is not improvising. Hence the description of improvisation as *impromptu* action. It is in this sense that, in improvisation, planning and execution converge in time (Moorman & Miner, 1998). People build their plan of action while going along, in face of practical problems, not in anticipation to imagined opportunities or threats. This effort of tackling problems does not occur, however, in the void. Improvisers rely on a minimal structure comprised of such elements as goals, deadlines and responsibilities. These elements provide the means for coordinating action without constraining it.

Due to its inseparability from the context where it originates, improvisation must be viewed as situated practice. This situatedness poses a series of relevant methodological (see section below) as well as practical questions. The latter have to do with the impossibility of prescribing how people can improvise to cope with a given issue. Practice is inseparable from the context, which means that it is not reducible to a set of general and situation-free principles and that it must instead be built by people embedded in a given situation.

Bricolage constitutes the second major dimension of improvisation. Due to the urgency of action in improvisational contexts, people need to act with the resources they have, not with those that would best fit their needs. Bricolage refers to the capacity to make do with the available materials. Confronted with the need to solve problems, people may have to use the available materials instead of triggering a process of resource allocation. Bricolage is facilitated by the ingenious use of intimately known materials. It

is a key dimension of improvisation because *impromptu* action requires people to act fast, not to engage in the search of the best resources. Bricoleurs use material, cognitive, affective and social resources:

- They improvise with the material resources they have. A soft drink may be used to increase the stickiness of a *passerelle* during a fashion show.
- They use their present cognitive resources, including knowledge and memory. Cognitive styles, such as being an innovator instead of an adaptor, may facilitate creative uses of resources. Cognition involved in improvisation is also related to tacit knowledge and intuition: due to the practical, often non-codified knowledge involved in improvisation, intuition is often presented as a defining aspect of improvisation.
- They use their affective resources. Bricolage and improvisation may produce feelings of competence and flow, thus enhancing the meaning of the work to those executing it. If goals are clear, feedback is immediate and the level of challenge matches individual skills, people will deeply engage in improvisational action, with psychologically rewarding results. Other emotional processes are involved in the improvisational process. When people internalise the importance of the goals and deadlines making the minimal structure, these may not only be a contextual factor but also a source of emotional involvement with the task, facilitating the propensity to improvise by means of an intense emotional link with the job at hand.
- Finally, bricoleurs draw on the existing social resources. They rely on those people with whom they already have some kind of relationship, regardless of these interlocutors' skills to the task. Baker, Miner and Eesley's (2003) research with entrepreneurs shows how these businesspeople were constrained by their

existing social networks. In fact, they made use of their networks with purposes different from those initially expected – for example, recruiting students to managerial positions to which they were not suited, because they knew them.

The analysis of the improvisational process at the organizational level would stress the relevance of other dimensions, such as organizational culture and control, power, and routines. These aspects are unequivocally important but they will not be addressed here, because they have more to do with the context where improvisation occurs than with improvisation itself.

Methodological issues. Due to its practical, situated and ephemeral nature, improvisation is not easy to study. It cannot be fully captured by inviting people to fill in a questionnaire asking them how much they have improvised or have relied on well defined plan or routine. It should not be approached *ex-post facto*, because people will possibly engage in a process of retrospective justification, reducing surprises and giving an appearance of predictability to a process which may not have been as predictable. Hence, methodologically, improvisation confronts researchers with some pertinent issues: how can we study a process involving action rather than attitudes or cognitive evaluation; a process which is ephemeral and unpredictable. How can researchers study something that they do not know where and when to look for in advance. Improvisation, therefore, confronts scholars with the limitations of the traditional research methods to deal with dynamic processes, rather than with discrete variables. Despite the difficulties raised by the topic, researchers are using several methods and techniques, including observational methods, ethnographic approaches, grounded theorizing, interviewing, critical incidents, case studies and the traditional quantitative surveys. The initial

attempts to uncover the improvisational process in organizations have mainly adopted qualitative, non-obtrusive research methods. If this preference is due to the nature of the subject itself, or if it results from the stage of research on improvisation (leading to a preference for theory building rather than for theory testing) is something that only time will tell.

Future directions. Being in its infancy as a scientific topic, the future of improvisation research is wide open. It may be further approached at the individual, group, and organizational levels. At the micro level, improvisation may be studied from a psychological perspective. Researchers may ask what individual characteristics (e.g., self-efficacy, locus of control) facilitate the willingness to improvise. Or they may compare groups of people in terms of their predisposition and proficiency in improvising (e.g., is improvisation more likely in experts or novices?). At the group level, team dynamics and demography may be influential. The same may be valid to leader behavior. Leaders favoring action orientation and autonomy may induce in members of their teams a pro-improvisation bias. At the organizational level, organizational strategy, structure and culture may be relevant influences. Not much is known about the influence of the organizational context on the practice of organizational improvisation. In bureaucratic organizations, one may hypothesize that people will rely on the hierarchy rather than on improvisation as a guide for action. It is admissible, however, that due precisely to the limitations imposed by the organization's structure, employees will act in an improvised fashion in order to counter structural inertia.

Despite the prevalence of the image of organizational change as resulting from planned efforts managed by top management, some authors are suggesting that organizations may change as the result of the accumulation of minor changes introduced throughout the organization by people lacking the option of strategic choice (Lanzara,1998; Orlikowski, 1996). This line of research suggests that improvisation should be addressed both as individual practice and as a systemic property of organizations. This double perspective suggests that, rather than being a negligible aspect of organizational life, improvisation can be equally relevant for individuals and their organizations.

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